REMINISCENCES OF AN ELDERLY ENTOMOLOGIST

By R. P. DEMUTH*

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In the autumn of 1926 I went up to Caius College, Cambridge to read architecture. In Tree Court, Kettlewell, reading medicine, was on the next staircase and there were other entomologists I collected with: Anthony Thompson who did a lot of work on the naming of butterfly varieties; Stubbs whose parents lived at Ely and who I think went out to Malaya and Harrison who made a name for himself at painting birds. The local town guru was Worsley-Wood who, when living in London, had become the acknowledged expert on *ocellaris* which was then a rare moth but I am afraid I put his nose out of joint when I turned it up very commonly in the Brecks and finished its rarity value.

There were no outstanding collecting areas close to Cambridge but further out what other town could better Wicken and Chippenham Fens, the Brecks, Monks Wood, Warboys Wood, Bearshanks Wood and Bedford Purlieus? Needless to say that as soon as the weather got warm we were at them. The travelling was done by bicycle but at some subsequent date Bernard got a car, an open Alvis looking like a bath tub with wheels at each corner and this was a great advantage when I collected with him. This might be the moment to mention Bernard's driving which was fast and when at the same time he was looking for plovers' nests was quite alarming. You might think it was impossible to look for plovers' nests while driving a car however slowly, but this was not so when, as in so much of the country round Cambridge, there were no roadside hedges. Bernard had found that the plover made a discernible special body movement when about to sit on its nest and this is what he spotted, and if the eggs were fresh he (not I) would have plovers' eggs for breakfast. I remember us sweeping round a gentle curve into a long straight road with wide grass verges. Another open car was approaching a long way off. There was plenty of room to pass but the other driver preferred the grass verge crisscrossed with drainage ditches. As we passed, he and his passengers where shooting up and down like jack-in-the-boxes as each ditch was crossed. After a short interval Bernard exchanged his Alvis for an open Lagonda which was able to go faster. Of course cars were scarce. I and two other architectural students decided to make a tour of the cathedrals of England. The car owner drove, I navigated, the man in the back kept the log which consisted of the make of all the cars we passed and in another column passed us (shades of the M1!). Bets were taken on the hourly total – naturally won by the driver!

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May 14 (1927). I went to Monks Wood. Weather cold and rather stormy. I arrived at one and beat till seven, first in the wood to the left of the road and then in Monks Wood proper. I got two ¾ fed *pruni* (list of other larvae follows). The woods look excellent, 400 acres of ideal ground but is I believe overworked. *Betulae* is rare, there are a few *w-album*, no more *sinapis*, although *iris* is probably there still: it is said to be fairly common.

But there was a much better wood than Monks Wood off the east side of the road between Warboys and Ramsey. The wood was approached off the main road by a lane with wide verges dotted with little blackthorns. On these *betulae* was common. Behind them in the hedge were nests of *lanestris*. The wood proper sat on the escarpment between the high ground and the fen and it was of mature oak, ash and wych elm with a dense undergrowth of blackthorn, privet and hazel. When I went back about fifteen years ago I could find the lane but the wood and the little blackthorns and the *lanestris* had gone.

May 20. Kettlewell, Mitchel, Best and I went by car to a certain wood in Hunts. (i.e. Warboys – dead secret!). We got there at 3.15. We beat between us 6 *pruni* larvae and 1 pupa. It is too late and they are normally fairly common here. I also beat *betulae, quercus, sphinx, crataegi.* Of the five British Hairstreaks four are common, *pruni, betulae, quercus, rubi* and the 5th, *w-album*, probably occurs as there is a good bit of wych elm. (*Pruni* is beaten from the tops of large blackthorn bushes which are often inaccessible and the results from beating for larvae are poor but when I visited Warboys later in the year the butterfly was very common sitting on the flowers of privet.)

To me the magic of Wicken ended when the bridge was built across the Cam and the long dead end lane from Fordham to Wicken became a signposted holiday route from Birmingham to the East Coast. Up to then, to get from Cambridge to Wicken you bicycled along the muddy path on the flood bank of the Cam as far as Upware where there was an inn on the far bank and you shouted for a ferry and if the wind in the poplars was too strong nobody heard you and that was that. In large letters on the gable of the inn was painted "Five miles from anywhere. No hurry" but one was in a hurry to catch one's first *palustris!* It was safer to go the long way round through Fordham and double ones mileage. Once at Wicken you turned down the unmarked track to the fen. On the left was Barnes' cottage (the old keeper father of post-was Barnes), and from there to the lode the track was lined by diminutive half timbered cottages with thatched roofs, each with a pocket handkerchief sized garden full of flowers. If it was the right season *machaon* fluttered from garden to garden. I used to stay at Rose Cottage which lived up to its name. You could just stand upright in its rooms and the staircase was a glorified ladder. The building

regulations and modern hygiene have rightly seen that all these were destroyed. The gardens are now nettles, good for peacocks but no use for swallowtails, which I believe anyhow no longer exist at Wicken.

Wicken was run by a body of well-to-do entomologists for entomologists. I was a subscriber. It was all rather like a Hampshire chalk stream with insects rather than trout as the quarry. I am certain m.v. light traps would have been banned as unsporting. When you arrived you first made your number with Barnes and paid him 10/-. He would allocate you a section of the main drove. At weekends in the *palustris* season the drove was fully booked. If you were Cockayne or Edelsten you got the section you wanted; if an unknown Cambridge undergraduate, a bit of the rest. After a good dinner (I remember a complete roast chicken with bread sauce being put before me) you strolled on to the fen where you would find that Barnes would have sugared your section of cork strips fixed to iron posts, put up a vertical sheet, lit an acetylene burner to illuminate the sheet and provided a table and chair. All you had to do was to catch the moths! Of course this was not all there was to it. There were larvae to search for and bushes and reed beds to explore for the geometridae. Best of all there was tea with Mrs. Barnes. Everyone in the fen made a point of being present and the beginner met the expert. This is where I first met Cockayne who was to become my friend and I his executor. Edelsten was the great wainscot man and was the only collector allowed to enter the reserve, which was the bottom end of the fen cut off from the rest by an unjumpable lode. This caused me great envy and I at once assumed that he was catching species previously unknown in Britain!

May 26. Warm and fine. I went to Wicken with Thompson. *Machaon* were about in considerable numbers but they were getting over and of the dozen or more I caught to examine only one was perfect. After tea (that would be tea with Mrs. Barnes) we spent 15 minutes looking for *quercifolia* and quickly got eight (this was by using Cockayne's method of looking for well-eaten small buckthorn, holding the top in one hand and sliding the other down the stem into the reeds where right at the bottom one's fingers would touch a great big furry *quercifolia* larva. A few days later, also on buckthorn, I found a single larva of *gonostigma* (now *recens*), my first of this local insect.

As an alternative to Wicken there was Chippenham Fen which was alleged to be stiff with keepers and consequently was not approached by the main access near the village but across fields from the west finally jumping a considerable lode.

June 9 (1927). Fine but very windy. I went in the afternoon to Chippenham Fen where, after eluding two keepers, I managed to get 16 *argentula*. They were only to be found in one drove on the middle fen, the only place sheltered from the wind. Walking

along the drove they would get up three feet in front of me, quite quietly and slowly. If a net is put over them as they are doing so, they at once go deep into the long grass where they are difficult to find. Chippenham looked lovely and I always think it looks much better, artistically and lepidopterally than Wicken.

May 27 (1927). Six of us went by car and train to Bearshanks Wood, Northamptonshire after *palaemon*. We had five minutes sunshine which produced five of the butterflies. I was not in the right place at the right time, a ride carpeted with bugle, and did not see a single one. *Lucina* was also about.

June 3 (1928). Kettlewell motored me over to Northants after *palaemon*. The day was as glorious as possible. We went first to Bearshanks and found it very scarce. K got three and I one after several hours. As we left we met a lot of men from the village arriving with nets. * * * *'s (name of well-known professional deleted) toadies I suppose and the cause of *palaemon's* scarcity (I don't seem to have considered that I too might be the cause!). We then went on to Bedford Purlieus where I took ten and K a few less. They were at first difficult to catch but as the sun went low they sat about on ground ivy but even then were difficult to see.

In the last fifty years the Brecks have completely changed. In 1926 they were waste ground; now they are fields of wheat, barley and sugar beet. Then you could walk across them for miles and see nothing but sandy stony ground, sparse grass, heather, birch and pine. Or you ought to have been able to walk across them but could not as they were so heavily keepered and there was so much open ground it was difficult to avoid hearing 'Hi you there! Don't you know you are on private land. Take the shortest path to the road!' Lord Iveagh, the head of the Guinness family, was the principal landlord and in the end by judicious flattery Bernard and I managed at first to be tolerated and subsequently to be taken on their rounds. The whole place swarmed with pheasant and partridge and stone curlew. At dusk the air was full of the stone curlew's call. In parts, and particularly Fleam Dyke, shrike sat at the tops of hawthorn bushes and of course all the special Breck moths were about and flourishing.

June 7 (1927). I paid my first visit to the Breck Sand district, a sandy waste given over to rabbits and plover. I went to the district between Freckenham and Mildenhall and into a field of rough fallow with a lot of clover growing in it. Here I got two of the Breck rarities, *sulphuralis* and *rubiginata*. I took 13 of the former and 8 of the latter. Both could be walked up from the rough vegetation. *Sulphuralis* flies very rapidly, especially with a strong wind behind it, but seldom for more than 10 yards and then only very low. It is insignificant on the wing and difficult to see when it pitches as it goes deep into the grass and will not come up again.

Rubiginata is easier to catch but will also not fly again when it has found a suitable place on the ground.

On June 22nd (1927) Bernard Kettlewell, his mother and I went to Millhook south of Bude in Cornwall for a week's collecting holiday. Millhook was the best-known locality for *arion*. We stayed at a farm known as the Lion's Den with a farmer of the name Burden. Mrs. Kettlewell was a very strong-minded woman. We went by rail to Bude and picnicked in the train. Nothing could be wasted so all the leftovers were collected into little parcels, the window was opened and the parcels thrown at any men seen working on the side of the line who ducked in terror at this unexpected gift. We took a taxi on to Millhook which is approached by a very steep hill down to the sea. As soon as the hill began to steepen the taxi was stopped and we were ordered out to walk to the bottom. Farmer Burden went regularly to Poundstock Market on his pony where he got very drunk and his friends would tie him on his pony for it to find its own way back. Mrs. Burden would untie him on his return. Mrs. Kettlewell witnessed this and was horrified.

Arion occurred on a steep south-eastern facing slope of short grass and thyme and gorse bushes. To make certain that no-one missed the spot the owner had put up a notice "Do not catch the flies". It was said by the experts that the time to catch the flies was in the early morning before breakfast but we saw none. The weather was awful and we were probably too early. A Mr. Tongue took the first one of the season on the day we left. *Sinapis* was common but we only saw it on the one fine day. I caught a *repandata* variety, white with black bands, a beauty. I tossed Bernard for it and tossed the halfcrown into a large clump of brambles. We casually mentioned it to Burden and next time we passed, the clump had been cut to the ground. Half-a-crown was real money in those days. I got, and still have, the *repandata.* We were more successful in searching with hand lamps at night for larvae on the cliff face. It is wonderful what a bit of concentration on larvae searching does for ones nerves. When I saw in daylight where we had been at night I could not believe we had been so crazy. We got a lot of larvae of *nigrocincta, flavicincta, craccae. Craccae* was on clumps of vetch growing on the shingle at the bottom of the cliff: easier to get it in the daylight by turning the plant over. The first *craccae* pupa emerged on July 25th and all 32 by July 27th. In 1927 choughs were common on the Millhook cliffs and seals in the little bays below them. Bernard borrowed a twelve bore gun from the farmer and shot at them when they put their heads above water which annoyed me and I would go off and sulk.

There was plenty of collecting to be done when I was at home. A night tour of the gas lamps of Branksome, Parkstone and Sandbanks, all suburbs between Bournemouth and Poole Harbour, was often profitable. In those days the gas street lamps were widely

spaced so each lamp was a bright spot in a sea of darkness. I had a round. Some lamps were always better than others. As I approached a good one my bicycle would accelerate. What was that long yellow footman on the iron frame? *Quadra*? Yes *quadra*! I would lean my bicycle against the lamppost and climb up on to the saddle when I could just reach the lamp which was of course enclosed in one of those four-sided metal and glass frames one now sees outside "Ye old Tudor inn". It had to be done late at night when most were in bed. As well as *quadra*, I would get *fascelina* and *cribrum*, the latter no doubt from a stretch of damp moorland at the side of Parkstone golf course where it was then quite common.

Sugaring in the New Forest was mostly done in an enclosure called Burley New as this was nearest to our home. It was all mature oak and the rides formed a convenient round. When I was in the depths of the forest I became nervous, starting at any sound but the sugar ahead kept me going. This enclosure produced *orion, sponsa* and *promissa. Sponsa* was rare, *promissa* common. I had to kill the *promissa* straight away. On my way home I would stop my bike and look at the magnificient creatures I had captured. Home would be reached at about two. Burley New now has a fringe of oaks but the centre is fir and I assume these moths have gone.

1928 and 1929 followed the same pattern. Reading my diary I am surprised at the number of collectors on the ground. On May 6 I visited Warboys Wood: "There were about a dozen other entomologists in the wood – rather a blow when you think Warboys is a close kept secret." In early July I was at Millhook again and this time I did get *arion* "I was the eighth entomologist staying that year with Mrs. Burden." Perhaps there is something in overcollecting damaging species!

Here are a few diary extracts.

July 16 (1928). Weather as fine as ever (temperature yesterday was 91°F) so I went to Swanage. *Edusa* was in quantities in a cove below Ballard Down but in very poor condition. *Galatea* was in fine condition and common. *Aglaia* was abundant and all fluttering about in the grass, looking for females and egg laying I suppose.

July 26. In the afternoon I went to the *cribrum* place alongside Parkstone golf course and took two males flying and one female at rest on grass. I came across two nightjar nests each with two chicks.

August 2. Met an entomologist, Cole by name. Heard good news. *Iris* in the Forest again and *sponsa* common in Pamber Forest (near Reading).

August 3. Three *exigua* on our local ragwort.

August 5. A fine warm day. The autumn *edusa* are out for the first time. Numbers were flying in the clover fields out towards Hengistbury Head. The majority, especially males were dwarfed. Perhaps the drought of last month has caused it. (In those days

clover was sown as an undercrop for wheat and as soon as the wheat was harvested there was ideal ground for *edusa*.)

Burley New enclosure (New Forest) in the evening. I took 8 *promissa* and did not miss one. They sit with wings spread and give about ten seconds before they fly off but when they do they generally sit on the bracken. On one tree there were two but one very kindly sat on my knee while I boxed the other. If you use the net the general penalty is a bald thorax.

August 11. (*Geminipuncta* was very common in the reeds growing in the brackish water of Christchurch Harbour.) Last *geminipuncta* out. They emerge about 8.30 pm and pair with gusto almost at once.

August 29. New cabinet arrived. (This was my first Hill ten drawer unit. I had won a prize at Cambridge and this is what I did with the money, about £15. I now have 130 drawers, value £15 *a drawer*?).

Sep. 8 and 9. Staying at Freshwater (Isle of Wight). Sugared on thistles growing on the cliff edge of Tennyson Down. A fair number of *obelisca* which was getting over and *australis* common (these were the dwarf thistles with flower heads just above the turf. A few drops of sugar dropped into the flower head was effective.)

May 14 (1929). Kettlewell, Stubbs, Wiltshire and I went to Warboys Wood in the evening. At late dusk *xerampelina* larvae started to move up the ash trunks and for about a quarter of an hour they were everywhere but then they were all up among the leaves and no more were to be seen.

May 23. I bicycled to Wimpole and beat wych elm. I took 16 *w-album* and had enormous numbers of *gilvago* in my tray. (This was the famous two mile long avenue of huge wych elms leading up to Wimpole House, now long since killed by Dutch elm disease and replaced by the National Trust with oak. This was followed on th 27th by another visit with Kettlewell when we used step ladders to beat the higher branches and found *w-album* commoner than lower down.)

June 7. At Wicken for the night. At light I got *palustris* ♂, *flammea* and *vittata*. *Palustris* came at 11.10 (summer time), fluttered about in the grass for quite a time while I was putting on a sweater and then climbed up a support of the sheet away from the light. (It was on this occasion that the stentorian voice of Barnes was heard across the Fen "Mr. Demuth he got *palustris*. I always gets extra when they gets *palustris*.")

On June 10 (1929) I finished with Cambridge and went down with Kettlewell to Wye in Kent.

June 11. Toward evening (about 6.30) we went to a field in the hills to the west of Wye and walked up about 40 *lineata* in an hour. A strong northerly wind made them difficult to catch.

June 12. In the evening I saw Captain Duffield at Wye (he was

on the staff at the agricultural college and lived in a house directly below the Crown Pit) and he told me to sugar the posts round his paddock which I did. I got 18 *leucophaea* which was a record for the posts.

June 14. Returned to Cambridge for degree. In the evening I had dinner with Stubbs at his home in Ely and then went to sugar in Rosswell Pits (these were man-made and near the beet sugar factory and were of deep water fringed with reed, and because they were dangerous they were fenced round and we sugared the fence). Conditions seemed very bad, a cold 56° at 8.30, strong wind, clear sky and bright moon. Moths however came in great numbers, over 50 a patch. Captures included 23 *obsoleta*. *Unanimis* was the commonest.

July 5. Portland. The wind increased all day and by evening it had reached 60 mph and it was almost impossible to stand on the cliffs. *Simulans* was just coming out and in prime condition, *lunigera* was not fully out yet and *lucernea* not at all. The valerian where I found them was on the tips from the first cliff quarry south of Church Ope Cove. Valerian growing on the more gentle grass slopes seemed useless, only where the plant grew among huge boulders 5 to 6 feet across did *simulans* appear (*simulans* emerges in the south in early July and in the daytime hides among rocks and crawls up to the valerian flowers at late dusk and if disturbed falls to the ground and shows no signs of flying. After aestivation it appears in September and then flies. It occurs in the garden of our house in Gloucestershire and sits on our valerian but never appears in the m.v. trap which is quite close to the valerian until September).

August 21. Went to Hopes Nose, Torquay. I took 11 *caniola* sitting about on twigs (1 pair). They sit quite still after 10 pm but very soon fall off when the light is on them and they are then impossible to find. (Hopes Nose which was quite close to central Torquay was then a good place for *putrescens*, and *barrettii* pupae were common among the roots of maritime campion growing on the scree.)

The place I visited most frequently was Hengistbury Head because it was only a mile from where we lived. It was a high gravel bluff covered in heather and terminating in steep gravel cliffs free of any vegetation. It formed the east end of Bournemouth Bay and behind it lay Christchurch Harbour which was brackish and tidal. Between the Head and the Harbour was a small wood, and to the west of the wood reed beds, and to the east salt marsh and then sand dunes and the sea shore. It had been bought by Selfridge who intended to build a castle on it but was deterred by the prospect of the sea breaking through on the west side and making it an island. In my day it belonged to Bournemouth Corporation and was isolated and lonely but now suburban development reaches to its edge.

On August 24 my diary sings its praises: "I doubt if there is

another place in England where within half a mile one can take *praecox, ripae, vestigialis, littoralis* on sand dunes; *maritima, geminipuncta, straminea* and *phragmitidis* in reed beds; *agathina, suspecta* and *neglecta* on moors; *dissimilis* and *emutaria* in salt marshes and a lot of the oak, poplar and birch insects in the wood. All so near together in fact that one stretch of sugar will do for them all."

(To be continued)

BOOK TALK SEVEN. – J. & W. Davis, who had a natural history shop at 31-33, Hythe Street, Dartford, Kent, fifty and more years ago, produced a number of curious little field naturalists' handbooks which they published on the premises, including six on lepidoptera.

(1) *The Larvae Collector's Guide and Calendar* (1899), must have been quite popular for it ran to at least six editions. I have seen the first, fifth and sixth of these, but none of the others. The Davises are supposed to have had a locality on Dartford Marshes for that strange moth *Cucullia scrophulariae* D. & S. the Water Betony, and in their price list appended to the fifth edition (1907), specimens of this insect are quoted at 9d. each. (2) *Lepidoptera Collecting: a Manual of Instruction for the Use of the Young Collector*, was issued in two editions. The second of these which appeared in 1906, and the only one I have seen, consists of a frontispiece, three plates, five text figures and 42 pages of letterpress plus 20 pages of advertisements and a price list. Among the illustrations are some of entomological impedimenta including two peculiar oil collecting lamps. (3) *The Naturalist's Annual and Diary of Records and Captures for 1902*, gives the times of appearance of British macrolepidoptera. So far as I am aware, the only surviving copy of this book is in the Public Library at Dartford. (4) *The Macrolepidopterist's Calendar* (1909) comprises 176 pages of text plus 8 pages of advertisements, and is very much after the style of Joseph Merrin's *Lepidopterist's Calendar* (London, 1860; second edition, Gloucester, 1875), with the species in their different stages arranged under months according to their times of appearance.

J. & W. Davis also advertised having produced (5) a "Revised edition, with considerable corrections and additions", of Abel Ingpen's well known *Entomologist's Guide to Collecting, Rearing and Preserving British and Foreign Insects*; and, (6) *Localities for Lepidoptera*, together "with maps etc." I have seen neither of the latter and they are not represented in the Dartford Public Library, the libraries of the Royal Entomological Society, the British Museum (Natural History) or that of the British Museum (Bloomsbury). If anyone knows of the existance of copies of either items (5) or (6), I should be most interested to receive information on them. – J. M. CHALMERS-HUNT.